Jonah's Anger Versus God's Mercy

Thrust statement: God's judgment is not always eye for eye.

Scripture reading: Jonah 3-4 and Romans 5:8-9

THE BOOK OF JONAH[1]

The book of Jonah is one of the most captivating books in the Old Testament. When one reads it, one cannot help but smile over its enraged prophet brooding under God's provisional vine (4:6). One cannot help but appreciate the characters in this delightful book - the religious sailors (1:11-16), the "great fish" (1:17), the repentant citizens of Nineveh and the Ninevite king (3:5-9), the vine (4:6), the worm (4:7), children (4:11), and cattle (4:11). Jonah is always good for a few smiles, and one cannot help but appreciate the literary techniques employed in telling the episode of Jonah and Nineveh.

JONAH

Jonah (782 BC) was an actual figure in history. This fact of his authenticity is verified by 2 Kings 14:25: "He [Jeroboam II] was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.[2] Jonah prophesied that God would expand the kingdom of Jeroboam II. This prediction of expansionism certainly made Jonah a popular preacher to the general public. Also, Jesus the Messiah, over seven hundred years later, verified the historicity of Jonah and the Ninevites in His confrontation with the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here (Matthew 12:39-41).

During Jonah's ministry, God called him to preach to the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire - one of the most dreaded of all nations. The Scriptures record this summons: "The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me'" (Jonah 1:1-2). This call no doubt came as a total shock to him. Jonah did not want this task of preaching to Israel's enemies. In fact, he rebelled against this command.

One cannot help but wonder if he thought God was crazy. One can almost hear Jonah say, "Surely, God, you must be joking!" Again, one wonders if he did not say, "No way." He wanted God to zap the Ninevites, Israel's enemies, for their wickedness. The narrator of the book of Jonah informs us that "Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD" (Jonah 1:3). Why was Jonah so adamant? Why did he refuse to go? Would you have refused?

Do I hear you saying no? Are you telling me that you would not have refused? Well, before you make up your mind, let's hear the rest of the story.

THE NINEVITES

In the book of Jonah, Jonah maintains that God can forgive and show mercy to anyone who repents. This granting of pardon and leniency are exemplified in the book of Jonah. In this treatise, Jonah traces his experiences of frustration and anger, and the lessons he learned about love, forgiveness, and mercy. But to fully interpret Jonah's anger at God's willingness to forgive the people of Nineveh, one must sense something of the degenerate, depraved mature of the Assyrians.

The Assyrians were a cruel and heartless people, who thought nothing of burying their enemies alive, skinning them or impaling them on sharp poles alive. Assyria was the most greedy and bloodthirsty nation of the ancient world. They would wipe out entire villages - killing men, women, and children. They would decapitate their victims and pile their heads at the gate of the city to put fear in all that might think to oppose their power. Assyria had plundered and spoiled their enemies and systematically deported them to other regions. Eventually, the ten northern tribes of Israel would simply disappear into their jaws, never to be heard of again.

JONAH AND MODERN TIMES

Do you understand more fully now why Jonah did not want to go, even though God said go? These people were some of the cruelest people on the face of the earth - hard-hearted, pitiless, insensitive, savage, ruthless, unkind, and unfeeling. Do you still say, "If God called me, I would go "? Let's reverse that call of God to preach to a modern day phenomenon, at least to some event that has occurred in the lifetime of many of us. To put this in modern terms, it would be like forgiving Adolph Hitler. Since the atrocities of Hitler are so well known, How could God forgive someone like that by his simply saying, "I repent"? This man was responsible for over six million deaths - men, women, and children. How could God forgive someone like Stalin who was responsible for over 50 million deaths? This is the dilemma that Jonah faced. Now, Do you understand? Did Jonah have a right to be angry with God? Should they have been destroyed?

Can we not identify with Jonah's anger? Do we want mercy shown to those who deserve punishment? How do you feel about the Oklahoma bombing? Over 160 people were killed. Do you think for one moment that the individuals who lost a husband, a wife, or a child would extend forgiveness to the ones responsible? Do you recall the Watergate scandal? Yes, well what do you think about the Watergate criminals? Do you recollect how easily all these men escaped severe punishment for their criminal behavior against the nation? Many of these public officials became rich through the writing of books about their unlawful course of action.

To bring this message of forgiveness just a little closer home, How do you deal with people who violently go against the grain with you on religious matters? There they are, walking around, living in luxury, cheerful, indifferent, apparently quite pleased with their own stone-blind theological positions, at least to you and me, so it seems. One wonders how God can let such persons be so misguided, so self-assured, so joyful, especially when one sees how much damage they do to Christian unity. How do you feel when someone writes you up in their party journal or weekly bulletin? Do you wish they would get what's coming to them? Yes, may the day hasten! We are very much like Jonah. We want some justice now, not later. We want some evidence that God endorses our opinions.

JONAH AND NIVEVEH

In spite of Jonah's wishes, Nineveh repented. Everyone in the immoral city, from the king to the common people, repented. As a result of this transformation of heart, God did not bring disaster upon the city. They should have been accountable for their sins; they had inflicted horrors on top of horrors upon so many people, sins of an unspeakable nature. But they turned and believed in God, so, perhaps, they deserved His forgiveness. How do you feel about Charles Colson's conversion, one of the Watergate men? Did God forgive him, of course, He did. Thank God for such mercy and compassion. It is unbelievable! God forgives because a person repents - salvation for turning. This is the message God gave to Ezekiel about backsliding Israel.

"Son of man, say to the house of Israel, `This is what you are saying: "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?"' Say to them, `As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?' (Ezekiel 33:10-11).

God speaks to me, God speaks to you! The message is, "Turn! Turn form your evil ways!"

Maybe we modern day Jonahs can learn to live with that and gladly accept God's forgiveness of anyone who turns from his or her evil. Jonah knew about this mercy and forgiveness of God even before he went to Nineveh.

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. [2] He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity (Jonah 4:1-2).

The interesting thing about the book of Jonah is that the prophet himself never does repent, and yet, throughout the book, he is the constant recipient of God's mercy. Given the call to go to Nineveh, he sets out in an opposite direction - Tarshish, two thousand miles away. He is thrown overboard, but God miraculously saves him from drowning through the rescue of a huge fish He had prepared. We see God dealing with Jonah with patience, never in anger. God deals with the angry prophet with calmness. He painstakingly maneuvers Jonah - sending him to Nineveh, giving him success in his mission, overlooking his sulking, shading his head in his anger, working through a worm and sun to teach Jonah about the marvels of mercy and the unlimited nature of God's love.

Jonah, as far as the record goes, does not repent, but God does not give up on him. We modern Jonahs do not repent, but God doesn't give up on us either. Instead, He sent his Son to reconcile us to Himself. His Son goes to Jerusalem to die a forgiving death for us that He did not deserve; in His mercy, he forgives us our hatreds and our pride and our blind inflexibility. The God that exhibited mercy to the Ninevites extends mercy and forgiveness to us through Jesus Christ. Paul addressed this issue of forgiveness in the Roman letter. He forcefully set forth this truth of mercy and compassion and forgiveness when he wrote:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Romans 5:8-11).

God love is not "eye for eye" - the justice that all of us Jonahs deserve. No, while we are yet sinners, Paul declares, that Christ died for us. And for that reason, and that reason alone, you and I can live. Thank God for His demonstration of love, mercy, compassion, and kindness toward us Jonahs.

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ENDNOTES

[1] I am deeply indebted to Elizabeth Achtemeier, ***Preaching as Theology and Art*** (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 25-27, for the concepts presented in this message.

[2] All Scripture citations are from the NIV, unless stated otherwise.